**THE QUEER IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE TEXT SET**

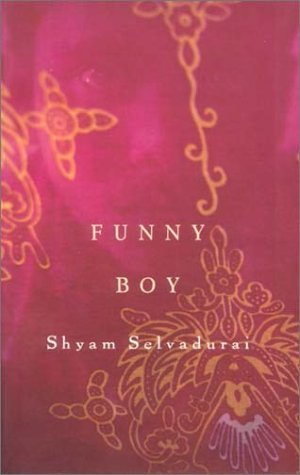
**Introduction (Theme, Purpose, Rationale)**

Many authors and, as a result, many English departments in North American schools have explored the immigrant experience. Less common, however, is the theme of the immigrant’s story through the lens of the queer experience, which is complicated in a myriad ways.

Often times, minority groups feel pressure to identify with only one aspect of their identity and discard the rest. Few have asked: what about those who feel situated in more than one category? A focused examination of two spheres of alienation that are frequently at odds with each other is much more complex. A specific aim of this text set is to represent a multiplicity of perspectives and voices from as many different members of the two communities as possible.

The purpose of introducing the stories of this very specific community is to present the multiplicity of an individual’s identity to students. It is much too easy to think reductively and represent people as just “queer” or “immigrant” without taking into consideration how the two intertwine and give rise to extremely unique perspectives. In a more general sense, the proposed analytical skills and acquired knowledge form this text set can be applied to any other “othered” groups, such as those pertaining to class, ability, gender, etcetera. It will allow students to recognise levels of privilege, power and discrimination that exist in all strata of society and to appreciate that issues, much less people, are rarely ever one-dimensional.

**1. Fiction**

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***Funny Boy* - Shyam Selvadurai**

Summary

*Funny Boy* is a coming-of-age story set in 1980s Sri Lanka when ethnic riots between Sinhalese and Tamils were at their peak. The story is told through the eyes of Arjie, a young boy growing up and learning about the ethnic tensions through various episodes in which his family interact with the “opposing” group of Sinhalese. As he moves from home to school and encounters different boys, he finds his homosexuality awakened and struggles against both his desires and how they will be perceived by a strongly disapproving family and culture.

Eventually, the riots grow and after his grandparents are killed, Arjie’s family escapes to Canada.

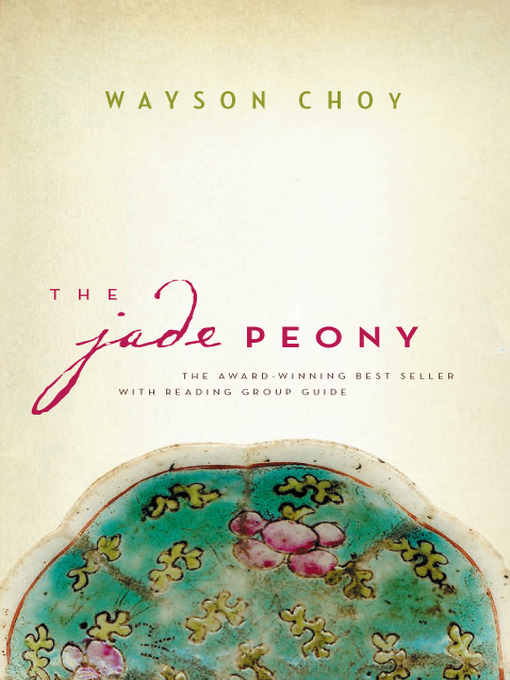
Rationale

Although the novel itself isn’t set in Canada, the fact that Arjie’s family moves to Canada (presumably Toronto, where many Tamil refugees fled in real life) informs much of his character’s identity. In addition, Selvadurai also grew up in Sri Lanka and immigrated to Toronto, so one can see a measure of autobiography. Selvadurai, however, has said that aside from the homosexual Sri Lankan immigrant to Canada link, he and Arjie had very different experiences.

One can see the immense cultural pressures that many Tamil people have to go through, either to marry within their own ethnic circles (like Arjie’s Aunt Radha) or to conform to gender norms (like Arjie being pressured to ‘act like a boy’ and not dress like a bride by his cousin Tanuja). It’s an episodic, somewhat hazy but still very lucid account of the melange of experiences that many immigrants bring to Canada. And while this is a very specific Sri Lankan experience, the themes and problems are universal.

In the case of this story, Arjie’s story is more a typical coming of age story, where he discovers his homosexuality and is also able to find a kindred spirit in Shehan, a boy he met at his school. The issue of revealing his identity to his family is left unresolved, but the suggestion is that Arjie will be freer to be himself in Canada. *Funny Boy* is a good example of a mostly positive view of the queer immigrant experience.

2. Historical Fiction

***The Jade Peony* – Wayson Choy**

Summary

*The Jade Peony* is set in 1930s and 40s Vancouver, in the already bustling Chinatown. The story deals with World War II events as well as the Chinese perspective of the Japanese, who were occupying China and had just attacked Pearl Harbour.

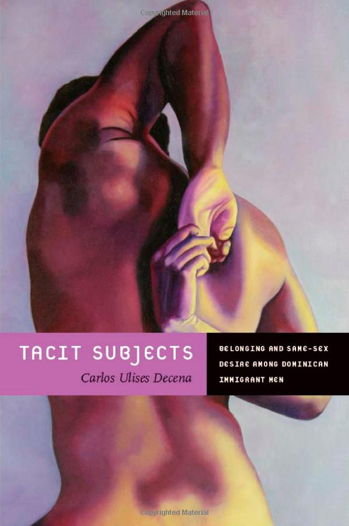
Choy also tackles the complex issue of Canadian-Chinese identity through the lens of inter-generational relationships; namely, how can these children relate to their parents who were born in another country and into another culture? The issue of preserving the old culture or adopting the new is central to the struggles of the main characters. Present, but not heavily stressed, are the burgeoning homosexual feelings of one of the brothers.

Rationale

The very crucial intersection of Chinese and Canadian identities informs much of Choy’s work, and has grown to become one of the looming voices of the East Asian immigrant story in Canada. The way in which he incorporates the aspect of homosexuality into the novel is actually very clever: much like traditional Chinese belief, familial identity subsumes all; therefore, Choy makes Jung-Sum’s homosexuality not the focus of the story, but leaves it somewhere on the periphery. Many conservative Chinese families would see it in the same way as not something to be accepted or worked on but to be pushed away to the border of the family’s attention.

On a personal note, I know that this text resounds quite a bit with the gay Asian-Canadian community because of the cultural mores exhibited by the characters. In a culture that routinely denies the existence of homosexuality, I believe that *The Jade Peony* can provide a very powerful identity and voice to queer Asian students, who may not even have a name for their feelings, which would make it invaluable to study in the classroom.

3. Critical Text/Essay

***Tacit Subjects: Belonging and Same-Sex Desire among Dominican Immigrant Men* – Carlos Ulises Decena**

Summary

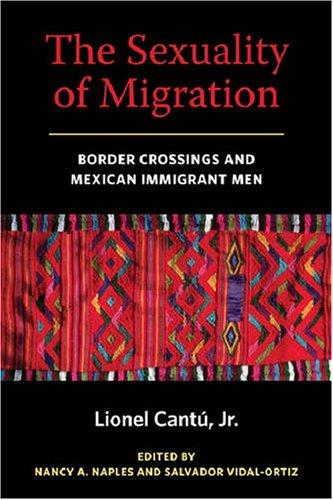
Decena’s work is a very crucial work on how “gay immigrant men of colour negotiate race, sexuality and power in their daily lives.” He focuses on the experience of immigrant Dominican men who, though having moving to America, seemingly move only from one sphere to another inside their own transnational Dominican society. The key aspect of the work is how these men recreate their Dominican identity in New York. They insist that their family implicitly understands the “tacit subject” of their homosexuality and the text explores how that silence informs their relationship with other Dominicans.

Rationale

Decena’s work could really be the lynchpin of this entire text set. It explores exactly what the set represents: the queer immigrant experience and how many of these people find it incredibly difficult to negotiate between their sexual and cultural identities in an alien country. Particularly important is the notion that if these men publicly reveal that specific aspect of their identity, they would be cut them off from the very familial and social resources that allowed them to migrate and survive in the first place. The pressure to choose between the two communities is very clear for these men.

*Tacit Subjects* is not all-encompassing, however, as it explores only a tiny subsection of both the queer and ethnic spectrum. There are many details that are specific to the Dominican community as well as the gay male community, which separate it from the myriad other queer immigrant stories. Still, it is a valuable examination of the one thing that many immigrant and minorities communities see as, by necessity, nonnegotiable: family. Most immigrant minorities will certainly be able to identify with the struggle of these men.

4. Non-fiction

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***The Sexuality of Migration* – Lionel Cantú, Jr.**

**Summary**

Cantú makes the connection between sexuality and migration very clear in this book by placing it in the context of Mexican immigration in the United States. He examines a large period of time from the gay asylum seekers of yore to the present day thriving gay tourism in Mexico.

He explores the ways in which gay male Mexican immigration to the United States is influenced by sexuality, and also explores modes of incorporation, resistance to marginalization, shaping of sexual identity by social and migratory factors, and questions of gender identity and notions of masculinity.

Rationale

Admittedly, there are several problems with choosing this text: one, it has a very narrow focus on the Mexican gay male immigrant experience in California; and, two, it is a scholarly text that may not be appropriate for a Grade 12 classroom.

I believe, however, that with adequate scaffolding and literary tools (organisers, vocabulary resources, thematic/textual reading skills, etc.), high school students have the ability understand scholarly language and complex themes. In fact, I think it is quite important for students to begin exploring these topics and genres before their university years. There is great value for students in seeing the scholarly work that is available on a topic that is so rarely examined. By giving a name and identity to these aspects of some students’ lives is important in the development of their identity.

Much like *Tacit Subjects,* the work deals with a small subsection of both communities. There is a commonality that is relevant to this text set, on the other hand, which is the aspect of the political economy in the immigrant experience. Even if students are not aware of all the academic terms and ideas, they will still intuitively have an understanding of how money plays into the necessity of migration.

5. Film (Fiction)

***Pariah* (dir. Dee Rees, 2011)**

Summary

A Brooklyn teen struggles with her individuality and her own identity in the face of strong opposition from family, friends and society. Alike (Lee) becomes increasingly alienated from her family because her sexual identity comes into conflict with her mother’s intense Christianity. She also begins to grow apart from her best friend Laura as she realises there is a social circle with which she identifies more outside of popular African-American culture.

The film chronicles Alike’s fierce desire to remain true to herself and how it brings her into, sometimes violent, conflict with her family and society.

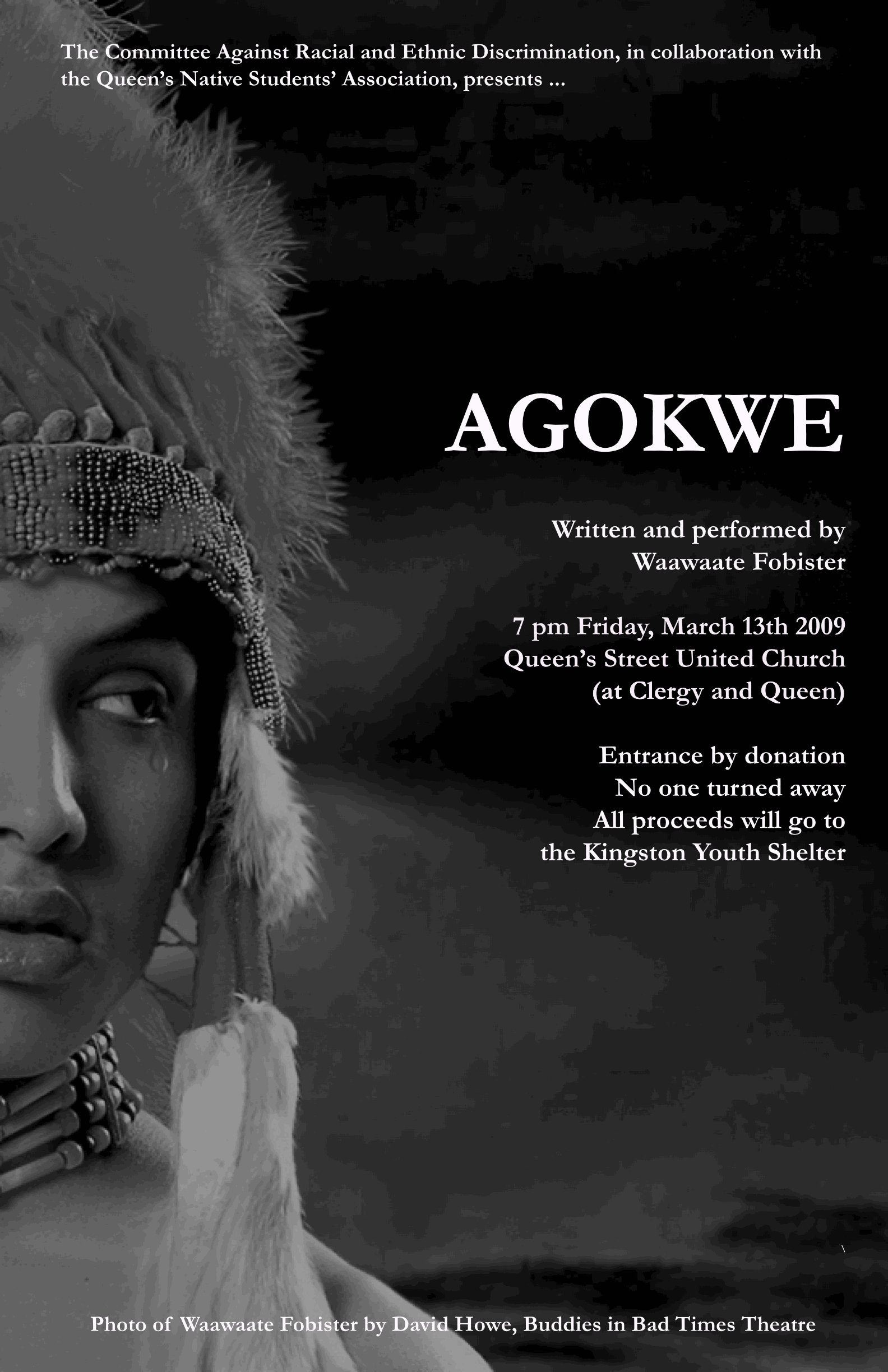
Rationale

*Pariah* is not an immigrant story. Alike’s family is clearly a New York family, born and raised. It does, however, address a somewhat taboo subject within African-American culture, which has much of its roots abroad, such as the much-publicised illegality of homosexuality in parts of Africa. In this way, it is still a valuable resource for students who may feel trapped within a culture that they can’t explain or understand.

The film adds the extra layer of Alike not fitting into the subculture into which she defaults, the black lesbian circle, because of its club culture. The extremely personal nature of this work (director Dee Rees wrote this as a chronicle of her own coming out story) will assuredly appeal to many students who feel the need to tell their own story, and give them both the tools and confidence to do so.

The great conflict within Alike is characteristic of many marginalised teenagers and effectively explores the choice that many queer teens must face, to conform to familial, cultural values or to express their true self.

6. Dramatic Text

***Agokwe* – (Written and performed by Waawaate Fobister)**

Summary

Agokwe is an Ojibwa word that means “two-spirited”. It is a one-man play by Waawaate Fobister that examines the issue of unrequited same-sex feelings between two boys on reserves in Northern Ontario.

The production is a multi-character monologue that is both acted and danced by Fobister. The story involves two boys who fall in love during hockey tournament time. Despite eventually sharing their feelings towards each other, societal pressures and the fear of coming out of the closet force them to separate. There is also a revolving cast of characters including the extended families of both boys who try to meddle in their love lives.

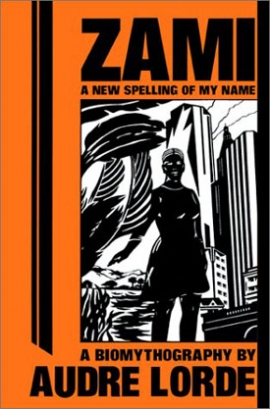
Rationale

Like *Pariah*, this is not an immigrant story in the conventional sense. I chose it specifically as a subversive piece, as a majority of students in Southern Ontario, no matter what their ethnic background, are sorely ignorant of Aboriginal Peoples issues. As one of, if not the most dispossessed communities in Canada, the Aboriginal Peoples voice is rarely, if ever, heard. By being aware of that fact, the reader can see that *Agokwe* becomes something like the examination of an immigrant culture. In the same way that other immigrant stories are about individuals who are thrust into an alien land and culture, the Aboriginal Peoples have had that alien culture thrust upon them.

More importantly, the character of Nanabush, the traditional Ojibwa trickster, is used to educate the audience on the status of *agokwe* in ancient Ojibwa culture. Nanabush reveals that traditionally two-spirited people were revered but that status was eventually lost as Western influences began to cement themselves in Ojibwa society.

*Agokwe* is important not only for the majority of students to see and understand, but it gives an important voice to both Aboriginal students and those who identify as two-spirited or intersex.

7. Autobiography/Biomythography



***Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* - Audre Lorde**

Summary

An autobiographical account of Lorde’s childhood in Harlem, growing up in Connecticut, and a short stint in Mexico, and finally her reconciliation with New York and the lesbian scene.

The book deals with several issues of marginalisation like racism (segregation), lesbianism and also ability (her blindness as a child).

Lorde puts race in the forefront of the story by stating her parents are Black West Indian as well as describing her mother as constantly longing for “home”, the island community from which she emigrated.

Rationale

Lorde’s piece is also not an immigrant story but, much like *Pariah*, she examines her lesbianism within the context of her immigrant parent’s identities. Although she is someone who does not feel the exclusive need to choose between her racial culture and her sexual identity, she does struggle with how to find a community in which she feels comfortable.

Her mother is a source of both strength and conflict, and this can be seen as a result of her mother’s home culture against that of a more liberalised America. Lorde must also face the same issue of conforming to familial values (which may be seen in her dating the white boy Peter) and forming her own identity, which she eventually does after traveling through Mexico and settling in New York, having explored the lesbian scenes in both cities.

As one of feminism’s most powerful voices, Lorde explores the cross-section of her cultural and sexual identities with authority. Undoubtedly, her powerful words on reconciliation between the two will provide many students with solace and a measure of certainty.

8. Community/Activism as Text

**Access Alliance**

Summary

Access Alliance is a community outreach program that serves newcomers to Canada wishing to settle in Toronto. One of the program’s main goals is to assist racialised immigrants and refugees from abroad, and they have specialised services for LGBTQ newcomers to Toronto.

Examples of these services include settlement services for LGBTQ immigrants who may not have enough confidence and pride to actively seek help and art programs for trans and lesbian refugees or immigrants to express themselves meaningfully.

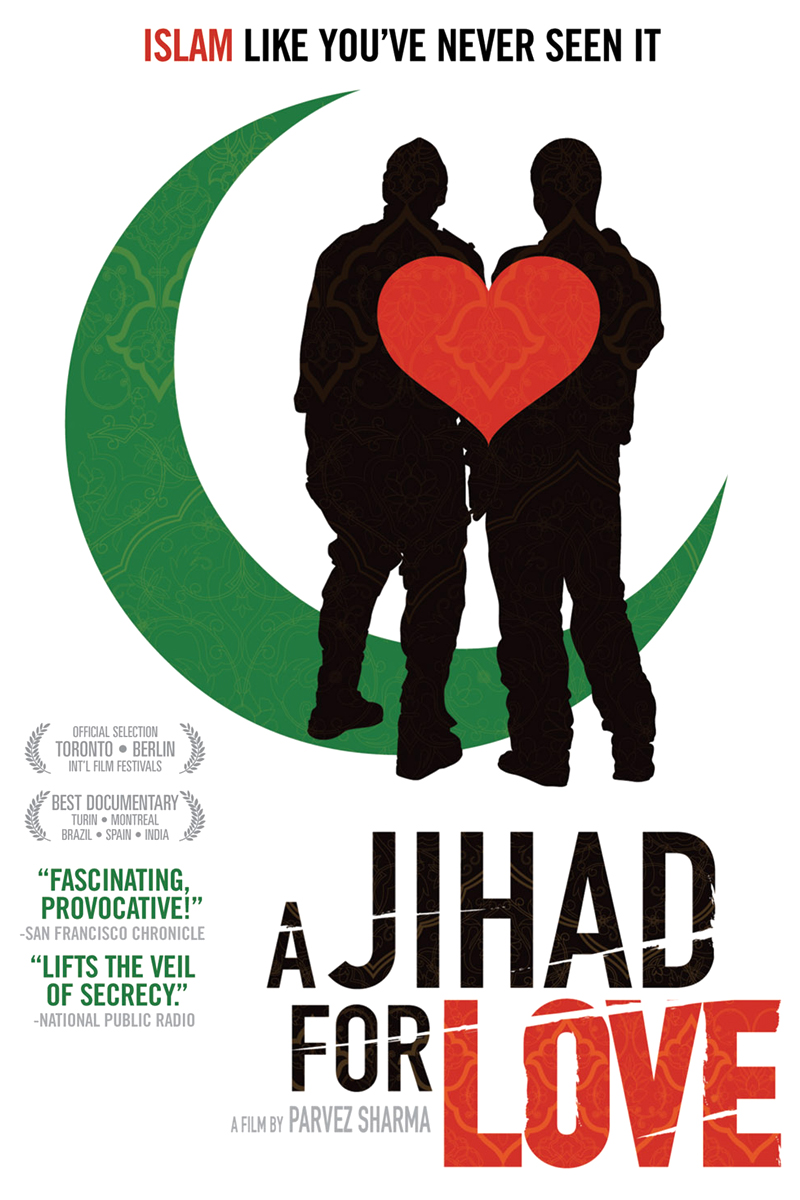
Rationale

Access Alliance is appropriate for the text set because it addresses the issue of the immigrant LGBTQ newcomer in practical and real life terms. The community outreach also responds to a very important group of newcomers to Canada: refugees. Many countries around the world still outlaw homosexuality, with punishments ranging from mob violence, imprisonment and hard labour, and even death.

Toronto is now one of the most multi-cultural cities in the entire world, so it is crucial that students become familiar with the real issues in the community. Both for immigrant students who may need those services because they or someone in their family are queer or for students who may want to contribute or volunteer to raise awareness of the issue.

Nowhere will students see more powerfully the critical intersection of sexual and cultural identities than in the lives of these immigrants. Many have either fled their home country, families and societies because of their sexuality or have not even been able to consider that part of their identity until their arrival in a new and alien country.

9. Film (non-fiction, documentary)

***A Jihad for Love* – Parvez Sharma**

Summary

*A Jihad for Love* is the world’s first documentary to focus on the co-existence of homosexuality and Islam. Speaking to the film’s international roots, it was filmed in 12 different countries and 9 languages.

Of course, many of the interviews take place in the West, but also in less hospitable countries like Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, where interviewees were interviewed anonymously out of necessity.

Sharma’s intended goal in making the film is to create a new language of affirmation, break down walls of silence, and re-address the role of religious fundamentalism in daily life.

Rationale

Parvez is abundantly aware of the dichotomy of identities when it comes to homosexuality and Islam. As one of the more negatively radicalised religions, especially by those in power in Islamic countries, Islam has been used to keep queer people repressed under threat of imprisonment, torture or death.

Indeed, the issue of having to “choose one’s minority” status, which is the focus of this text set, is examined in this documentary, with many immigrants to the West enjoying liberal freedom of sexuality but still subject to racial profiling. In a way, these immigrants have been forced to choose their sexual identity while forfeiting their racial identity. As a result, many of those that stay in the Middle East and choose to maintain their queer identity are forced to renounce their religion.

The interviewees in the film, however, refuse to make any of those sacrifices and instead struggle to reconcile their religion and their sexual identity, even under threat of death and violence. Such determination and negotiation is extremely important for students to see and addresses a triad of minority that many immigrants to the West must face (religion, sexuality and ethnicity). The documentary takes a positive view that Islam and queerness do not have to be mutually exclusive. It shows examples of people who are laying the foundation for a more accepting future, which students must absolutely see in examining this theme.

10. Dance/Movement as Text

**Ill Nana/DiverseCity Dance Company**

Summary

([Click for video](http://youtu.be/RMGGTvgHBlY))

Ill Nana is a dance collective based in Toronto whose mission statement is to make dance accessible to all abilities, genders, classes, body types, races and ethnicities. The purpose is to value and learn from diverse experiences in order to combat oppressive power structures and represent the voice of marginalised peoples.

Most of the dancers are classically trained, but the idea of spreading affirmative dance by including as many dance styles as possible in order to break down barriers is one that the company sees as integral to creating unity and peace in the community.

Rationale

The mission statement of the company is in line with the text set because it focuses on trying to simultaneously break down barriers for immigrant minorities as well as queer people. The message is that queer people do not have to choose their culture or their sexual identity, but they can combine both in dance. In addition, including Ill Nana will give students exposure to more artistic outlets other than poetry, prose and film, which is important so that they may find the proper outlet that suits their needs.

Like Access Alliance, the company’s grounding in real life issues and activism is important to include so that students can see how the abstract ideas that they learn in class can be put to practice in their own community in a multitude of ways.